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A NATION'S SORROW.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON THE SABBATH AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF

PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

In the Central Congregational Church, Providence.

APRIL 15, 1865.

BY THE PASTOR,
REV. LEONARD SWAIN.

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SERMON.

LAMENTATIONS, 1 : 12.—*Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.*

The thunderbolt has fallen. Every home in the land is desolate; and the tolling bells and the wailing cannon are the audible breaking of a nation's heart under the pressure of this great and overwhelming sorrow.

We had passed through all the extremes of joy and grief during these last four years, until we seemed to ourselves to have exhausted the whole range of feeling, and to have nothing left out of which to form a new sensation. We had tasted defeat: we had tasted victory. We had borne the long agony of hope and fear, until hope had triumphed, and fear and doubt had given place to certainty. Success upon success had crowned our arms. The march of Sherman, the capture of Richmond, the surrender of Lee's army, had carried us to the very summit of the slope. Last Monday morning the nation was in a delirium of joy over what it regarded as the virtual end of the war. The contest was over; peace was at hand; and we felt and said to one another, as the day was going by, that if we lived a hundred years, we could never again see a day of such impression. Whatever could take place after that, the capture of Johnston's army, the actual cessation of the war, the submission of the South, and the formal re-establishment of the national authority over the whole land,—all this and all beside was mere matter of course, and could wake no emotion, when it came, comparable to the grand sensation which was past or passing. We must now return to the regions of common-place, and address ourselves to the mere details of that

difficult, though glorious work, which our own successes had brought upon us.

But God had something more. There was another deep which had not been sounded. The pendulum must swing again from side to side of the mighty arch. Yesterday morning five million families waked from their slumbers to find themselves orphaned. On the preceding night the assassin's hand had laid President Lincoln in death, with the Secretary of State, as was feared, mortally wounded by his side. The nation was paralyzed with horror. Men read the news on the street, and sat down fainting on the curbstone. All faces were pale, and all hands clasped in agony. One wail of astonishment and anguish broke from the nation's lips, and then it fell upon the earth stupefied and speechless.

Never was there such a national sorrow since the world began: such a plunge, from such a height of joy, to such a depth of grief, with so sudden a movement, and by such a combination of appalling circumstances.

No tragedy which was ever conceived by the genius of man is equal in grandeur and awfulness to that which has just now been enacted before our eyes. The President of a great nation, appointed of God and beloved of man, raised up to do a work of deliverance unequaled in history, who had carried the country through a four years' war against rebellion and slavery striking at its life, who had subdued the one and destroyed the other by a combination of wisdom, firmness and goodness which had drawn upon him the admiration of a world, who had survived all the perils of his first term of service and was entering upon the second with every prospect of finishing in glory what he had began in doubt and in fear; *he*, when all danger seemed past, when the war was virtually ended and the enemy virtually subdued, when he was stretching the olive branch to the foe and preparing to meet him with a generous clemency which took that very foe by surprise; *he*, there in his own capital, with peace in his heart and the top-stone of liberty in his hands, just ready to be laid upon the finished edifice; *he*, there, smitten basely down by the very hand which he was grasping in reconciliation and new brotherhood, and so laid himself, the last and most illustrious sacrifice, upon the altar of freedom, dying by the hand of slavery

in order that liberty might live by his blood and grow green and strong forever over his grave;—is there anything in history, is there anything in the whole domain of poetry itself so tragic, so sad, or so sublime? I know but one thing that surpasses it in all the annals of time, and that is the death of Him whose blood shed on Calvary by the hands of *His* enemies, purchased the salvation of the world.

That event of Calvary darkened the sun in heaven, shook the earth with horror, and covered the world with gloom. It was the assassination of the Son of God. Yet out of that horror of death has come the blessing of eternal life. It is the victory obtained for us and the world over that death, and by that death, on the morning of the Resurrection, that this Christian Sabbath itself was meant to commemorate. Let us accept the omen, and while, as a nation, we weep and clasp our hands in agony beneath the overwhelming horror that *now* darkens the earth and the sky, let us remember that even this event, like that of Calvary, is enclosed and included in the plan of God, and that out of this terrible culmination of the wrath of man God may yet bring the material of his praise.

It is no time as yet to trace all, or even any, of the possible results which God's wisdom and goodness may bring to us, as a people, out of this appalling crime which has been committed against the life of the nation. There are only one or two of these results of good which can be alluded to this morning.

1. This horrible deed of assassination is the deed and crime of slavery. The individual perpetrator is nothing. The nation scarcely cares to ask who he is, or what he is. He is the mere instrument, the hand which held the pistol, the dagger, and the bludgeon. The arm, the body, the life, which nerved and directed that hand and struck with it at the nation's heart, was slavery itself.

It needed this finishing act to complete its work, to make a perfect manifestation of its spirit, and to show that there is absolutely nothing this side of hell too horrible for it to propose or execute in the accomplishment of its selfish purposes. It has rent the Union; it has raised the standard of rebellion; it has slain half a million of our young men; it has starved and murdered sixty thousand of our soldiers in its prisons; and now,

when it can do no more by honorable warfare, when it is beaten in the field, its territory seized, its cities captured, its armies conquered and surrendered, and itself under bonds of submission and peace, it arms its hand with the assassin's dagger, and when its victim's back is turned it strikes at that revered and sacred life which represents the life of the nation itself, and whose taking away brings greater peril to the nation than any other possible calamity. Nay, the plot went further. The blow that struck the President was meant to sweep down the whole Cabinet, so that the guiding brain and hand being removed, the government might be dissolved, universal anarchy and confusion ensue, and the nation thus fall to pieces and perish in the very act and moment of its triumph. In striking at the life of the President, therefore, it was nothing less than the nation itself which slavery undertook to assassinate.

It needed this, and it needed but this, to show the infernal spirit of slavery, and to rouse against it such a sentiment of hatred and such a purpose of extermination as no language will henceforth be able to express, and no bounds hereafter will ever be able to restrain. When the people of this nation meet together to take up the bloody corpse of President Lincoln and lay it in the grave beneath the shadow of the Capitol, when the earth is filled in and the green turf is smoothed and rounded upon it, they will clasp mutual hands over that green grave in such a covenant, and lift them in such an oath, as the winds have never heard and the sun has never seen; a covenant and an oath that slavery shall die the death, without pardon and without truce, and with not a single hair's breadth of compromise, concession or conciliation. It shall die the death which it prepared for him; it shall be buried in his grave; and its epitaph for all coming time shall be written upon his tombstone.

2. Another obvious effect of this dreadful crime will be to prepare the mind of the nation for the work of justice and judgment which is yet to be done upon the leaders and instigators of this rebellion. I do not speak of revenge, that spirit of wild and furious retaliation which is sometimes waked by such provocation, and which, rushing forth madly and blindly, scatters destruction and death upon every living thing within its reach. That is not

needed; that is not a duty; that is not consistent with the teachings of God's word and the spirit of Christianity. I speak of the maintenance of law. I speak of the claims of public justice, which is but another name for public benevolence and a regard for the public safety. I speak of judicial trial to be held, of judicial sentence to be pronounced, and of judicial penalty to be executed, as by law provided in the case of those who have been guilty of treason against the government of the United States.

We were beginning to drift away from that great principle and centre of safety before this calamity overtook us. There was an alarming tone in some of our public journals, and in some of our public addresses, which indicated that we might be going to shrink, as a nation, from the great final duty to which we had been brought by the victorious termination of our conflict. We had overpowered our enemy, and now we were to use magnanimity and mercy, and waiving all further retribution, we were to leave him to be punished by his own reflections, while we, on our part, hastened to welcome him back to the family circle whose peace he had broken, and whose very existence, for four years of mortal conflict, he had used his most desperate efforts to annihilate. We have overpowered our enemy; we have shown ourselves stronger than he; now let us show that we can afford to be generous; do not let us exact hard terms from him in his surrender; let us give him some gentle token of our disapprobation, and then, forgiving and forgetting what is past, shake hands in reconciliation and receive him once more to our fellowship.

All this is brought to an end at once and forever by the dreadful event which hangs all the sanctuaries of God in mourning to-day. The dagger of the assassin has waked us out of that dream, and bidden us

> "Sleep no more"—
> "Macbeth doth murder sleep."

It was, perhaps, while he was under the first approaches of that fatal slumber that the President himself was struck to death. He did not see the assassin's hand that was lifted over him. The hand descended, and he sleeps the sleep of death, but the nation survives and escapes to profit by the lesson. The blow that closed his eyes in eternal slumber has opened ours to that "eternal vigilance" which is the price of liberty and of safety. Now that our eyes

are opened by this appalling event, we begin to realize for the first time that we have been asleep, and we shudder to see into the midst of what fatal perils these slumbers of a mistaken generosity were leading us.

It may be that nothing short of the startling and awful calamity which has come upon us could have thoroughly roused us out of that fatal slumber. And that *has* thoroughly roused us. We shall hear no more talk of pardoning the leaders of this rebellion. There will be one spectacle which will stop all that kind of argument and appeal: look there at that bloody scene in the Capital, and see what these men did at the very moment when they were pleading for gentle terms, when they were promising repentance, and when we were beginning to take their hand in the very spirit of this unwatchful generosity. When we reach forth our right hand they seize it with their right hand, not that they may return its pressure, but that they may hold it from defending itself, while with their left hand they may drive the dagger more securely into our bosom.

We have seen the spectacle, we have waked from sleep, we have learned the lesson, and we shall never forget it. From this day forward there will be but one sentiment and one voice. This rebellion has been overpowered: the criminal has been seized and brought into court by the police with infinite cost of life, blood, and treasure. But the work of justice and the duty of government is not done; it is only begun when the criminal is apprehended and brought to the bar. Now let him be tried; let his guilt be proved by regular judicial process; then let his sentence be solemnly pronounced; then let it be faithfully executed upon him.

This rebellion has been seized, overpowered, and brought into court. Now let it receive judgment at the hands of the nation. Let the leaders of the rebellion, or a suitable number of them, be tried, sentenced and executed for treason, as by the laws of the land ordered and provided; then justice, having had its place, and the majesty of the law having been honored, mercy may have its exercise, and the people of the rebellious States be forgiven.

Nothing short of *this* measure of justice at least will henceforth satisfy this nation. The cry has already begun to shape itself out of our inarticulate wailings, and it will go on waxing louder and

louder until it becomes as unmistakeable and awful as the very thunder of the heavens. And what will make it still more awful and irresistible is, that, like the thunder of the heavens, it will be the voice of God.

3. With equal strength and clearness will the voice of a people, now waked out of its sleep, pronounce upon the spirit of those who would *speak* of the leaders of this rebellion, civil or military, or of any of them, in any other terms than those of the deepest abhorrence and execration. It will say, let us hear no more praising of the statesmanship of Davis, or the generalship of Lee, and declaring that we shall yet live as a people to be proud of their skill, their prowess, their military genius, or of anything whatever that pertains to them. He is a corrupter of youth, he is a poisoner of the public morals, he is a teacher of treason and rebellion to all Americans in all coming time, who couples the names of these men and their associates with anything that can appeal to American pride. Let them go to their own place in history, and stand side by side with Benedict Arnold, and with Judas Iscariot, from whose example *nothing* is to be drawn but warning, and whose names are *never* to be used except as a synonym for all ignominy and reproach. "The *name* of the wicked shall rot."

4. But greater than all, and better than all, and as the condition of all other effects that may be good, let us hope that this awful affliction will turn the nation to God.

We were beginning again to forget Him, because we had attained, as we thought, to safety and success. The prize was almost within our grasp; we had but to put forth our hand and it was ours. The way looked straight and easy before us, and we, who in the night of our peril and our sorrow had cried unto the Lord for help, were now in the sudden brightness of our prosperity beginning to feel that henceforth we were strong and wise enough to take care of ourselves. God saw it and it displeased Him, and He put forth His hand and smote us with this terrible blow in the very moment of our triumph, that He might lay the nation at His feet and teach us our dependence upon Him.

And there we lie at His feet to-day, a whole nation stunned, amazed, and speechless in our grief; our President a murdered corpse in the Capitol; our flag at half-mast, and the colors of death

flying over it; our banners, that so lately floated on the breeze, proud with the glory of a hundred victories, now drooped in the sanctuary and clinging in terror at God's altars.

Yesterday we were filled with the thought of our own greatness. To-day God only is great, and all our strength, and confidence, and loftiness have sunk from their place and lie dashed in the dust before Him.

The Lord of hosts hath done it, to hide pride from man, to stain all human glory, and to bring into contempt all the honorable of the earth. He is a jealous God, and He will not give his glory to another, nor His praise to graven images.

O, let us remember and heed the lesson. Other nations need God, but this nation *never, never* can do without Him. He has done too much for us, He has taken us too near to Himself, He has filled our history too full of His wonderful and awful deeds, to make it safe for us ever to forget Him. We are a consecrated and a covenanted people, and we must remember the covenant and the consecration. We belong to God. Whoever is President, the Lord Jehovah must be our King. We must choose Him. We must obey Him. We must swear allegiance to Him. If we would keep the Stars and Stripes streaming in the sky we must keep the banner of the Lord of Hosts riding the breezes far above them.

We must honor Him if we would have Him honor us. We must reverence His will. We must enthrone His law. We must bring all our glory and honor into His kingdom. We have been baptized to this issue. It is the law of our history. It is the secret of our doom or of our destiny. We have been sealed as a nation to God and to Christ. Woe unto us if we forget the Lord and walk as do the secular kingdoms. The sorrow of to-day tells us that if *we* provoke God's anger it will be no common thunder which shall smite us. If we fall by His hand it will be by a hotter bolt than ever split the strength of nations. If we live, it must be on the loftiest plane and to the highest destiny. If we die, it will be with a more dreadful doom than ever beaconed the path of history.

This, this above all things else, is the lesson of our awful calamity. We shall read it the more clearly through our tears; we shall take it the more deeply into our souls with the anguish which rends our very spirits asunder.

If we learn the lesson well, and ponder it deeply and wisely, our sorrow shall yet be our redemption. We shall see that one man has died for the people, in order that the whole nation might not perish. We shall confess the hand of God. We shall turn to Him who has smitten us. We shall repent of our sins against Him, and make a new and everlasting covenant with Him. Then shall He return unto us and bless us. He shall heal all our woes, and bring upon us the good which, through all these years, He has been secretly preparing for us. He will make us His people, and He Himself will be our God. The nations that hated us shall come bending to us for His sake, and all the ends of the earth shall say, when they behold us, "Happy is the people that is in such a case; yea, happy is that people whose God is the Lord."

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